



ASSEMBLEA PLENARIA DEL CCEE

Roma, 23-26 settembre 2021



Rome, The Quirinale Palace, September 24th, 2021
Audience of the President of the Italian Republic
The Hon. Sergio Mattarella
At the Council of Bishops' Conferences of Europe

Welcome by Cardinale Angelo Bagnasco
President of the CCEE

Mr. President,

We offer you our respectful greetings and we are grateful to you for receiving the Council of Bishops' Conferences of Europe. This year we are gathered in Rome for the annual Plenary Assembly, celebrating the 50th anniversary of its establishment.

A few years after the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council, the Holy Pontiff Paul VI believed that an organisation of communion of the Episcopal Conferences of European Nations could be an additional stimulus for the Catholic Church's evangelisation and pastoral mission in a dialogue with other Christian denominations, with other religions and all people of goodwill.

He envisages an entity that with humility and passion could intensify "shared feelings" without which everything becomes more difficult, even peaceful coexistence, solidarity, sharing the experience of a common destiny and the world.

The Council's mission is not to take the place of the Episcopal Conferences of individual countries, but be a point of comparison, of experience, of analysis of challenges, of pastoral inspiration, knowing that, in the unity rooted in Christ and guaranteed by the Pope, Europe experiences a shared history, declined in the traditions, sensitivities, problems and hopes of individual populations. One could say that every population incarnates universal and personal characteristics; Europe, in fact, is not an organisation or a shape, but a "living spirit", that spirit that the Catholic Church – united in diversity – intends to also express in our organisation.

Honourable Mr. President, as pastors we have the grace of living with our communities in every corner of the continent, even the most remote ones; they may be scattered but are not lost. We know about their joys and their problems; we are aware of their religious sense and profoundest values; we listen to the intimacy of their hearts, the memories of their fathers, their fears and their hopes. We stand by them and for them in the name of Jesus the Good Shepherd, and for us this is an honour, a responsibility and a joy. The love they feel for their land and for their interior worlds gives meaning to their lives as people, families, societies and populations. This is in no way reductive, nor does it exclude anything, but allows for the culture of encounters so greatly hoped for by the Holy Father Francis, it allows us to walk together with responsible and respectful solidarity.

At this moment we are seeing that humankind is suffering from uncertainty and bewilderment when faced with the future. Christians cannot be dark pessimists since Christ is our hope, nor

can they be naïve optimists: They must look to reality through the eyes of faith and speak to the world above all using the language of the Gospel.

In this perspective, Europe must rediscover itself and therefore its place in history. The world looks to Europe for reasons that are not always noble ones; In spite of this, its most profound interest, albeit not confessed, concerns a renewed Europe, a “Europe of the spirit”. This involves the specifically Christian religious spirit that has established its basis here, has permitted the formation of a European conscience, of the state of law and a culture that has generated different but not opposed peoples because they are united by the roots in the Gospel.

The greatest result of such a civilisation is expressed in that extremely high consideration of human beings that is not entrusted to the majority but safeguarded by God. Humankind, in fact is increasingly itself, both because bringing with itself families and its land and also because it is not something closed but rather goes beyond itself in its relationship with the creation and with others, not only because it needs to, but rather by choice. Above all one transcends towards “Something” that is the true, full and definitive answer to its yearning for life and love; this something is not a gnosis but “Someone”, it is the person of God made man in Christ.

Furthermore – as known – the gospel offers the criteria of real laicity speaking of God and of Caesar; it states a necessary distinction that does not exclude loyal and respectful cooperation for society’s integral good. Two thousand years of history have given us immense treasures in terms of civilisation and beauty inspired by the Christian faith that are also a universal legacy. Additionally, we have just mentioned the fact that the Gospel contains supranatural and natural truths, hence belonging to human experience and to the universal cognitive process, such as for example justice, peace, mercy, forgiveness, altruism... Faith confirms, purifies, relaunches and elevates, without removing the creaturalty of many principles and values. Therefore it would not be correct to catalogue every intervention as “denominational”.

Acknowledging this also enlightens the position of believers in the public debate; for Christians not only is it possible but also a duty not so as to impose something but in order to contribute to democratic processes. Habermas had already removed all doubt in recognising the rights of believers to participate in the public debate on condition that they did not appeal to revealed authorities and used languages understandable to everyone, hence “institutional” language, presenting rational arguments with their proposals.

Mr. President, we wish to once again thank you and wish you the very best: Through your person we wish to reach out to the highest civilian and political authorities in all European nations. To you and to everyone else, the Pastors of the Catholic Church, united with the Holy Father Francis, assure the trusting prayers of the Risen Jesus, the giver of all light, renewing the commitment to provide our specific contribution for the good of our people and the entire continent, which as Saint John Paul II said, goes from the Atlantic to the Urals. Thank you.